DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 682 CS 213 488

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TITLE Making Choices: Determining the Need To Be Out.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Collegiality; Higher Education; *Homosexuality; Student Attitudes; *Student Reaction; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Homophobia; Professional Concerns

ABSTRACT

A respected and effective college writing instructor (who happens to be gay but does not find it necessary or desirable to announce his sexual orientation) considers himself respectful of all people and even tolerant of those wish to express views the instructor personally finds reprehensible. This has allowed students to open up to the instructor: students trust him because they know he respects everyone and they respect him as a teacher. Announcing his sexual orientation to his class would silence those students who hold prejudicial views about gays and lesbians. Two gay students concur in the instructor's belief that the decision to "come out" is up to the individual. The question of remaining closeted or coming out with regards to fellow instructors should also be up to the individual. To develop and maintain a satisfactory professional life, the instructor eventually found it necessary to be "out" with regard to his colleagues. Yet being visibly gay does, at times, evoke hostile feelings from others. It also may not be politically wise to be openly lesbian or gay. Each situation in which instructors find themselves must be evaluated separately, and the decision as to whether or not they will identify themselves as lesbian or gay must be based on that specific situation. (RS)

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Making Choices: Determining the Need to Be Out

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Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication

Cincinnati, Ohio

March 21-24, 1992

CS213488

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Making Choices: Determining the Need to Be Out

With the arrival of the 1960's and the sudden growth of large numbers of a younger generation, predominantly high school and college students, leaving the shorelines of the United States to explore the once only dreamed-of cities and byways of Europe, the traditional image of the ugly American gradually began to change. Thus the image of the brash, demanding Americans who believed that their nationality and the contents of their wallets could--and should--bring them what they expected gave way to the image of the backpacking congenial Americans who often thumbed their way through the countryside--and certainly without a fistful of Yankee dollars.

However, perhaps one very real problem still remains. Something for which Americans often get criticized by the people of other countries when these Americans travel is the fact that they frequently reveal very personal information about their lives to almost total strangers. Though this may be considered an overture of friendship by the Americans, it often makes the recipient quite uncomfortable because this information was not only unexpected; it was not desired. Consequently, rather than succeeding in opening up doorways to a form of relationship, it has, instead, succeeded in setting up barriers, and it may, in fact, cause the individual to withdraw.

Apply the image of tourism to the academic institution, and we find a number of questions being raised. If the instructor automatically volunteers such personal information as sexual orientation, how will the instructor's role as a visible lesbian or gay man affect students' comfort in the classroom? Will this revelation promote dialogue or inhibit discussion?

Particularly at conservative schools located in equally conservative communities, what are the instructor's different responsibilities to straight and to lesbian and gay students? In addition, we must apply this situation, that is, the automatic revelation of personal information, to the instructor's relationship with his colleagues and his superiors. Will not coming out limit an instructor professionally, or, on the other hand, will coming out limit the instructor? I maintain that a blanket response to these questions, one which maintains that an instructor must or must not come out to his students, colleagues, or superiors, is neither possible nor sound. Instead, I firmly believe that the decision to come out is one which should be based on individual situations, both in and out of the classroom.

It is important to me that I am considered and respected as a teacher first and foremost. This statement does not negate the fact that I also happen to be gay, but being gay is simply one other aspect of my life, just as I am a New Yorker or a Democrat or a soccer fan. Since I tend to distrust and, at times, to abhor labels, I therefore do not find it necessary or desirable to announce my sexual orientation and make that fact general knowledge. Being an effective teacher, too, means that I must attempt to reach all students, and in the conservative school where I teach, being publicly open would tend to silence many of the students I would want to--and, from personal experience, would be able to--reach.

A few months ago, while on the way to my class, I heard a student in the hallway calling out to one of his friends, "Hey, faggot, watcha' doin' tonight?" True, this sort of vocal horror is the exception rather

than the rule where I work, but it is somewhat indicative of the conservative, provincial, and sometimes bigoted attitude of many students at the college. When the Gay and Lesbian Association was finally organized and sanctioned on the campus about two years ago, this was the type of student that voiced his protest against the formation of such an organization. Would having confronted that particular student, therefore, telling him that I was gay and that I found his language offensive, suddenly earned me his respect? I think not.

On the other hand, setting the example as an individual, as a teacher, and as a person who goes unlabeled, one who is respectful of all people and even tolerant of those who wish to express views which I personally may find reprehensible, has allowed students to open themselves up to me. Consider this case: A student recently offered to give me a lift in his car to the garage where my car was being tuned up. At one point during the ride, however, he became silent for a few minutes and then suddenly said, "I came out three weeks ago." My initial reaction was to remain silent, primarily because I had not expected to be made privy to such a revelation, especially not by someone who was stereotypically the idealized straight college student: goodlooking, intelligent, bright-eyed, personable, and (most significant) usually surrounded by attentive female classmates. In addition, I was alone with a student and was concerned about what rumors, if any, might be started if he related this incident to his friends or to other faculty members. Nevertheless, my silence did not deter him from continuing his revelation, and his words began to pour out. I learned, among other things, that he thought he would be a

pariah for the rest of his life because he was gay (This student came from a small town in Alabama, I should add.) and that I was the first straight person to whom he had told his story; but when I continued to remain silent, he said that he thought he should stop since I did not seem to want to hear any more. That was when I told him that I too was gay, that I have maintained a stable relationship with a partner for almost seventeen years, that I have obviously been successful professionally, and that I am far from being a pariah in society. However, the significant observation which I want to make here is this: When I asked him why he chose me as his "sounding board," so to speak, he said that he felt he could trust me because I evidently respected everyone. Thus he came to me as a teacher first, not because I happened to be gay.

In the classroom, too, I believe that it is essential to reach all students. If I show that I am respectful of the right of the students to express their ideas and that I, in fact, encourage honesty in both their oral and written presentations, then I have automatically empowered them. On the other hand, announcing outright that I am gay would, I firmly believe, change the atmosphere in the classroom and silence at least some of these students. If, therefore, I have succeeded in silencing even one student by doing so, then I am not the effective teacher I have set out to be.

But does the student want to or need to know various details about our personal lives, including our sexual orientation? Do we not, in fact, impose ourselves on others and on their rights by doing this when such information is neither expected nor requested? I asked two of my students, both of whom are openly gay and who are members of the Gay and Lesbian

Association on campus, a number of questions regarding this situation. When asked whether or not they felt that faculty members who are lesbian or gay should be "out" to their students, both responded that it was totally up to the instructors themselves. In fact, they felt the same way about lesbian and gay students who may have chosen to remain closeted. The privacy of the individual, they said, is always to be respected. When asked what they felt would be the effect on a class led by an instructor who was openly lesbian or gay, they said that, in general, straight students who were uncomfortable with gays would probably be silenced. As for the lesbian or gay students themselves, some might feel more comfortable and might feel free to speak their minds; others, however, might not be affected at all. Such concurrence by students whose opinions I respect therefore reconfirms my belief that a decision to identify oneself as lesbian or gay should be determined on a case by case basis.

The question of remaining closeted or coming out with regard to one's colleagues still involves a decision, and here again I believe that a blanket statement as to whether or not one should "come out" is neither possible not sound. The individual situation should determine whether or not one identifies oneself as lesbian or gay. As Teri Gamble notes in her book, Communication Works, "It is up to [the individuals] to decide when it is appropriate for [them] to share [their] innermost thoughts, feelings, and intentions with others; it is also up to the [individuals] to decide when complete openness is not in [their] best interest" (49). Thus once more a number of questions arise: Is there a need to identify oneself as lesbian or gay? Do colleagues really want to know whether

one is lesbian or gay? And finally, is it always politically wise to identify oneself as lesbian or gay?

In order to develop and maintain a satisfactory professional life, I eventually found it necessary to be "out" with regard to my colleagues in the department, and I no longer attempt to conceal the fact that I am gay. However, that decision to reveal my sexual orientation was determined, once again, on an individual basis, primarily on a sense of friendship or a general feeling of comraderie. I never, at any time, denied the fact that I was gay, but neither did I make a general announcement to the faculty, informing them of my sexual orientation. Doing so, I felt, was neither appropriate nor essential. The benefits of being out, of course, have been substantial. For one, there is no feeling of inner stress, which would undoubtedly exist if I were living in the closet. In addition, those faculty, friends of mine who, for whatever reason, are still in the closet, feel better because they can be open with me as well as with other colleagues who are out. And finally, when dinner invitations are extended to the traditionally married couples within the department, they are also extended to my partner and me.

But let us not ignore the fact that problems do exist for the individual who has decided to be visibly gay, especially when the geographic or academic community is a conservative one. Simply stated, some people prefer not knowing about one's sexual orientation, especially if that sexual orientation is unacceptable to them. It is their problem, we could say, not ours; but we are not required to socialize with these individuals, and in the general day-to-day working situation, there is really no need to announce one's

life style.

Yet being visibly gay does, at times, evoke hostile feelings from others. Even though the President of the college as well as the vast majority of the faculty welcomed the newly-formed Gay and Lesbian Association on the campus where I teach, one member of the faculty used the school newspaper to publish a vitriolic and irrational attack on that organization. He, in fact, demanded that the organization be denied recognition, stating that it fostered immoral practices in which all of us (those who were not gay or lesbian, I assume he meant) were now having our faces rubbed! In anocher incident, at a college where one of my friends teaches, an openly gay faculty member was accused by one of his straight colleagues of recommending a textbook to be used by the whole department, a textbook recommended, the accuser implied, because this visibly gay professor was "interested in" the sales rep. Shortly thereafter, a heated and ugly discussion concerning this incident then took place, though the majority of the members of the department knew that the book in question had been recommended long before the sales representative had even appeared at the college.

Finally, we also need to consider whether it is always politically wise to be openly lesbian or gay. In a somewhat humorous incident related to me a number of years ago, by a friend who had applied for a position in the Communications Department where he presently works, I learned that a member of the administration ran a check on him to determine whether or not he was "straight." Evidently, at the time he had applied for his present position, he was working for a radio station whose call letters were WGAY, although the suggestiveness of the letters had nothing to do with one's

sexual orientation! There is, therefore, one might argue, the pragmatic need for self-preservation. In the State of New Jersey, where I teach, and I assume in a number of other states, one cannot be fired for being a homosexual; however, one can be let go for being an inneffective teacher. What if students did not register for the class sections of an openly lesbian or gay professor? Would that not then be grounds for attempting to dismiss that individual?

Toward the end of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, Holden's English teacher tries to help his former student to deal realistically with the world--the world as it exists--by writing down a quotation from a psychoanalyst named Wilhelm Stekel. "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one" (103). But Holden has been seeking, and has been expecting to find, an ideal world, one in which honesty and innocence prevail. However, the goal of his quest is just that--an ideal. We, on the other hand, (as does Holden, one might add) live in a world in which ugliness and unpleasantness exist, a world in which there are not only the pimply elevator operators like Maurice, who punch Holden in the stomach when he attempts to stand up to him, but also a world in which there are gay-bashers and other homophobes who would, at times and given the opportunity, do us in. I, for one, therefore strongly believe that a hard and fast political line, one which states that all lesbian and gay teachers should and must come out, is not always a viable philosophy. Though there are undoubtedly benefits to being open with regard to one's sexual orientation, in reality neither the need to come out nor the

benefits of coming out are always very clear. Thus each situation in which the instructors find themselves must be evaluated separately, and the decision as to whether or not they will identify themselves as lesbian or gay must be based on that specific situation. Once we find ourselves in the academic community, we are teachers first, and our task is to provide, as best we can, an atmosphere in which all students have the opportunity to share in--and feel free to share in--the learning experience. Yet in that same academic community we are also colleagues, and we therefore need to maintain a professional identity as well as a personal integrity. But is it fully necessary to come out in every situation in order to maintain that identity and integrity? Only we alone have the right to determine the answer to that question.

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